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SUBJECT: ZAMBIA: UNHCR LAUNCHES CONGOLESE REPATRIATION

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On May 5, DCM joined Zambian Government (GRZ) officials and members of the Lusaka diplomatic corps to launch the 2009 repatriation of Congolese refugees in Zambia.

UNHCR's 2008 goal is to repatriate 19,336 refugees, transported 400 at a time three times per week through December by boat on Lake Tanganyika. If UNHCR Meets its 2008 goal, it and the GRZ intend to consolidate the refugees into a single camp in late 2008 and complete the repatriation by the end of 2009. The refugees appear genuinely enthusiastic about the repatriation, especially in light of security guarantees arranged over the last few months by the DRC, Zambia and UN agencies. DCM also visited an impressive, but temporary, USG-funded UNHCR transit center where returning refugees are staged prior to embarkation. UNHCR reports only about that there are only about 20 HIV positive refugees -- an infection rate of only a fraction of a percentage (but inconsistent with earlier studies of prevalence in the camps). Of these, eight are on treatment. End summary.

¶2. (U) On May 5, DCM traveled with Zambian Minister of Home Affairs Ronnie Shikapwasha, UNHCR Representative James Lynch, The International Organization for Migration Country Director, the Ambassadors of Sweden and the DRC and European Commissioner Representative Derek Fee to Mpulungu in northern Zambia on the shores of Lake Tanganyika to launch the 2008 repatriation of Congolese refugees. Shikapwasha was accompanied by his Permanent Secretary and the Home Ministry's Commissioner for Refugees, Jacob Mphepo.

¶3. (SBU) After touring the UNCHR-leased transport ship at quayside, the team saw off 365 Congolese refugees from the Kala camp; a follow-on to the 446 who had departed on the first voyage over the weekend. The repatriation by boat of about 400 refugees at a time to Moba, DRC from Mpulungu will continue on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays through mid-December, 2008. During July, when high winds inhibit transportation on Lake Tanganyika, the boat repatriations will be suspended in favor of weekly overland repatriations of up to 800 refugees by bus through the border at Pweto. UNHCR plans to repatriate 19,336 Congolese refugees from the Kala and Mwange camps this year. If successful, fewer than 15,000 Congolese refugees will remain in Zambia by early ¶2009. UNHCR plans to consolidate Congolese refugees in a single camp after the 2008 repatriations. GRZ and UNHCR officials say that full and final repatriation (except for a small "residual" that will choose to stay in Zambia) can be completed by the end of 2009.

¶4. (SBU) In mid-2007, after reports of violent attacks on returning refugees in their home region in eastern DRC filtered back to the camps, repatriations were suspended after fewer than 8000 Congolese refugees had been transported home. Several tripartite meetings of Congolese, Zambian and UN officials in the ensuing months reassured refugee officials that the situation in the DRC was safe and secure.

"Security is good," said Lynch, "but anything can happen." According to UNHCR, International Organization for Migration, and Red Cross officials in northern Zambia, the refugees in the camps -- who have been enjoying safe haven in Zambia since 1999 -- now say they are ready to return home.

15. (SBU) The team visited a UNHCR transit center funded by PRM bureau contributions. Refugees travel 10 hours by bus from the camp in Luapula Province to the Transit Center in Mpulungu where they spend the night before embarking for the DRC. Sturdy latrines, an infirmary, and temporary tents have been erected on a hillside overlooking the port of Mpulungu.

16. (SBU) UNHCR officials reported that only eight of the refugees in Zambia are on Anti-retroviral treatment; another 14 have tested positive for HIV. (Comment: This is inconsistent with a 2005 CDC-funded UNHCR Sentinel Surveillance study that found HIV rates between two and three percent among pregnant women in the camps.) According to UNHCR officials, HIV positive refugees are discouraged from traveling home to the Congo ostensibly because treatment is unavailable there -- this may result in fewer seeking voluntary testing and counseling.

17. (SBU) Comment: The 19,336 goal seems achievable, if ambitious. Home Affairs officials seem very eager to make progress on the repatriations. UNHCR reports that returning refugees receive three months of food supplies, seeds, tools, and building materials upon arrival in Moba. The joint Congolese/Zambia/UN meetings in late 2007 and early 2008 seem to have satisfied all parties that security will be provided and that the repatriations will continue unhindered for the rest of the year. The first groups of refugees appeared

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eager to return, but after nearly a decade in Zambia, hundreds of refugees who can only remember Zambia (including hundreds of children born in the camps) may be less eager to (re)start their lives in the uncertain Northern Katanga Province. The transit center in Mpulungu seems like money well spent by the USG. The repatriation -- funded mainly by the USG and the EU -- is most welcome to GRZ officials.

MARTINEZ